



Southwestern Washington Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

The Rev. Richard E. Jaech, Bishop

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Bishop Jaech's Letter against Racism

*In the beginning...the Spirit-breath of God blew over the chaotic waters. Genesis 1
Then Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." John 20*

I can't breathe, said George Floyd

Each breath is harder, gasped the COVID 19 patient.

My lungs are on fire, said the street protestor after inhaling tear gas.

Breath is our dearest gift. We panic when we can't breathe. Yet, in our fears and competition, we regularly ignore and choke off each other's voice, we cut down each other's value, we strangle the very life out of those who are different.ⁱ

What we are experiencing in our nation right now is agonizing, tragic, and complex beyond any one set of words that try to make sense of it. But, here is what comes to me on this Pentecost Sunday, 2020.

White privilege, in which I participate and from which I benefit, is strangling my brothers, sisters, and siblings of color. Overt racist acts are killing people in the street day after day. Systemic white supremacy, which arises from the fear of losing control, has ruled in this country for over 400 years.

I confess that I am a part of this privileged system. I am enraged by the killing of George Floyd and, so, I am moved to write this letter. But then, I go back to relaxing safely in my comfortable home in a 99% white neighborhood in Tacoma. With the threat of COVID 19 virus in the air, I say, "Yes, we must stay home and stay healthy." Yet, while I work safely at home, a disproportionately large number of black and brown workers become infected with the coronavirus working at the meat plants, assembly lines, grocery stores, food processing plants, hospitals, and nursing homes. As a white male, I assume that I will be respected and heard everywhere I go, and I am often unaware of those who are not.ⁱⁱ

The sight of burning buildings in so many American cities right now is troubling. Together with many leaders of color, including Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, and Congresswoman Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, I join in saying, "Protest is legitimate; violence is not." Yet, as Martin Luther King, Jr. and others have stated, I know that riots happen when people have been abused and unheard for too long.

Dom Helder Camara was the Catholic Archbishop in the impoverished city of Recife, Brazil, during a time of harsh military dictatorship in the 1970's and 80's. Regarding public violence, Helder Camara said that it is important to see all three stages of violence. The first stage of violence in Recife was when the dictators, in coordination with the wealthy business owners, forced people to work year after year at starving wages and live in slums without adequate clinics or schools. The second stage of violence happened when the impoverished people rose up in protest and marched through the streets, many peacefully, some violently. The third stage of violence happened when the military leaders sent in their

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troops to violently put down the protesters. Helder Camara pointed out that it's often only the middle stage, the protests of the abused, that are named as violence and negatively judged by the general public, while the original violence and violent response of the government forces is viewed as normal, appropriate behavior. In recent days in our country, we have seen all three stages of violence on our city streets.

I want to affirm and support the vast majority of protesters, whose marches and rallies have been peaceful, non-violent, and necessary. I also want to affirm and support the majority of police officers who are performing their work in a responsible way that is essential to a safe society.

Yet, I deeply denounce the illegal and inhuman behavior of police officers who have murdered people of color. With the ELCA Conference of Bishops, I especially mourn and protest the killing of Black Americans Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Dreasion (Sean) Reed, and George Floyd.ⁱⁱⁱ I also denounce the extremist political groups of both the left and right who are committing acts of violence.

However, our present crisis is not just the result of good officer – bad officer dynamics. We are witnessing yet another upsurge of racist abuse within the ocean of systemic racism that has covered our nation for centuries. Even as we respond to the COVID 19 virus, we must work as an entire nation to find healing from the viral sin of racism and white privilege.

Today's celebration of Pentecost highlights the gift of power that God gives to us. The Holy Spirit once again moves over our troubled waters, stirring us up to seek new life. Jesus once again stands in our midst, breathing peace into us. Not a peace that ignores deadly patterns or blindly accepts an unjust status quo. Rather, Jesus brings the peace that happens when all God's people work and struggle to live justly and fairly with one another.

In just over two weeks on June 17, the ELCA will commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Charleston shooting, when a young white Lutheran man, Dylan Roof, shot and killed nine members of a Bible study at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC. I urge you to participate in this event, which is an opportunity to refocus on our own role in the tragedy of racial hatred and our need for healing. Congregational resources for this commemoration can be found at <https://elca.org/emanuelnine>.

However, we need to do more than study and pray. As our Pastor Annie Jones-Barnes tells us, when loved ones are gasping, "I can't breathe," we need to walk and act. We need to confess and change.^{iv} We need to re-commit ourselves to building the society that God wants for us.

May the Spirit-breath of God fill us and agitate us to walk the path towards justice together.

In Christ,



Bishop Rick Jaech

ⁱ I thank Rev. Angela Denker of Minneapolis for connecting the dimensions of breath, breathing, and the implications of Pentecost in the current crisis. See <https://churchnew.org/blog/2020/05/29/various>

ⁱⁱ University of Washington Professor Robin D'Angelo provides very helpful writings and resources about white privilege. See her website <https://robindiangelo.com>

ⁱⁱⁱ The letter from the ELCA Conference of Bishops, <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.44/vzp.864.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/ELCA-reaffirms-commitment-to-combatting-white-supremacy-5-26-20.pdf>

^{iv} See <https://www.facebook.com/SWWASynod/posts/3078108065561062>